

Tribulation

Kawkab al-Sharq, 13 June 1933

It was a fine tribulation — and what a dire tribulation this sheikh from the Azhar's sheikhs visited upon himself — and he was appointed yesterday as a scholar of religion on the Council of Sheikhs; he raised the banner of Islam's word aloft, victorious; he strengthened the religion of God and displayed its triumphant standard, and manifested the light of God, clear and luminous, casting no shadow and allowing no cloud, however thin or fine, to settle between himself and the people. Yet all of this accomplished nothing for Islam, great or small.

It was a fine tribulation — and what a noble tribulation this sheikh from the Azhar's sheikhs visited upon himself — and he was appointed yesterday as a scholar of religion on the Council of Sheikhs. How could this fine tribulation not be, given the fierce effort that the sheikh yesterday from the session's opening to its close went up to the pulpit, called to the Book of God, insisted on preserving the Book of God, and was grieved that the Book of God might be neglected. The sheikhs listened to him at the outset — then grew impatient at being detained by him in something, then moved from impatience to displeasure, then to vexation, then to agitation, and then came the sheikh's departure from the session and his being the first to leave of the departing — the sheikh preceding even those who withdrew, our master His Eminence the Grand Sheikh of the noble Azhar.

God bless the Sheikh! How this speech grated on the sheikhs' ears. And how impatient are men of religion with the eloquence of men of religion! God bless them — did this sincere mujahid in the path of God not deserve a little encouragement and support, this eloquent orator speaking out for the right of God's religion, this noble knight defending the Book of God? Did he deserve nothing from encouragement and support and endorsement, nothing bestowed on him by His Eminence the Grand Sheikh of the noble Azhar — the one to whom circumstances had made it obligatory to protect Islam, guard the Quran, and defend it against infringement? But the Azhar's Sheikh grew angry and furious, then rallied in haste and calmed himself and handed over the orating sheikh to reproach and rebuke — making the sheikh roam and wander and then fall silent, then speak again, speak at length and then be brief. And the members around him, all eyes on him, with all ears turned to him and all faces directed toward him, grew ever more repelled from him.

He grew repelled, and they grew repelled from him; until when exertion had reached its limit from him, someone among them urged him gently, and so he drank from the water of life and energy and vitality were renewed in his body, and his tongue was unleashed and the flow of his eloquence swelled and his authority was magnified and his torrent gathered strength, until the Minister of Traditions cried out: 'Heigh! Are we in a language school, or in a legislative council?'

And the sheikh thundered and threatened, then settled, and then was agitated again, and the Council president warned him; and the sheikh did not heed, and a council member descended on the sheikh and a tremor traversed the council's precincts — he would continue speaking until morning, then he moved on. And the council had been seized by grief and gloom and worry and sadness, spreading over it all. Then another sheikh, one of the men of religion, appealed to the orating sheikh. This one entreated him, and that one would restrain him from speech — but the sheikh neither gave nor stopped, but went on. For him there was a splendid spiritual attraction: the sheikh had extended his authority over the field until it was empty of every adversary. Then the sheikh proposed an amendment to a provision of the law, and wished by this amendment to impose on all the children of Muslims in their calling to God, in inspiring their resolve and awakening their feeling and stirring their noble emotions — so men of religion from among those with the sheikh would respond, and the sheikh and the Azhar's Sheikh had already passed through what the sheikh wished and prevailed and the Quran's complete memorisation had become a duty incumbent on every Muslim. But the council session ended and the president left and the members left and the sheikh left with those departing; then opinion was taken from those returning, and if memorising the Quran was then made a duty of sufficiency rather than an individual duty as the law wished, those who wished from among the Muslims would undertake it as the sheikh wished. And the sheikh was insistent on his opinion but the agreement had been reached outside the session and the council was taken by surprise. And the matter ended as it began, and the sheikh's striving passed into no fruit, wasted on the council's sessions that would have been filled by the sheikh's speech and his splendid eloquent defence had the members been given the chance to study the law's provisions and scrutinise the group of its articles that needed scrutiny.

A number of men of compulsory education had come to attend the council and to hear what would be said there about this subject of grave

importance; they heard the sheikh and heard him, and did not see the council nor did they hear it; and when God withheld success from some of the people and they were driven to excessive silence or excessive speech, they wasted the right and disabled both matters.

In this session there is a lesson for whoever wished to take heed, a moral for whoever wished to be warned, a study for whoever wished to understand the lessons. In it there was the excess in silence as the sheikhs of the Azhar used to do — a squanderer of the right for no benefit. And the excess in speech as the sheikh did yesterday — also a squanderer of the right for no benefit. And that the best of matters is their middle course. And that excess has no good in it whatever its source, whatever its goal, and whatever its subject.

In it also was that His Eminence the Grand Sheikh of the noble Azhar had stood yesterday in a stance that was not fitting for him — for it was his due and his obligation before any other person to speak in this matter the word of men of religion, to settle the matter in its proper place, and show the council a clear and plain way, with no crookedness or evasion in it. But the sheikh turned aside and veered, preferring silence, then preferring withdrawal, then returning preferring silence again — so he neither was absent from the session nor did he attend it in full, so that his attendance would have been beneficial and useful. It was his right to take his companion in silence, and to make clear that God Almighty was more gentle with His servants than to impose on all of them the complete memorisation of the Quran, and that the better course was for a righteous group from among the sons of Muslims to undertake the memorisation of the Quran as the law intended — but the sheikh feared to declare this right openly lest he be accused of discouraging the religion and falling short in defending it, and feared to join the orating sheikh lest he anger the minister and provoke the displeasure of the men of authority. The sheikh preferred to stand in a strange stance, the least that can be said of it is that — as the noble Quran says: [neither toward these, nor toward those] — it lacked frankness; and frankness in the right is the most obligatory of things for men of religion.

But who expected from our great master a stance other than his stance? And did the ancient poet err when he said:

*I would dress one squadron with another squadron —
yet when they became entangled I shook my hand free of them.*

The sheikh indeed shook his hand yesterday and nothing remained in it. As for the council, its stance was no less strange than the stance of the Grand Sheikh. He was in close quarters with the orating sheikh, excessively patient with him; perhaps he feared him and did not wish to show the calling of religion, while the Grand Sheikh anxiously watched, unable to support his companion nor to abandon him.

And so this law passed without study or scrutiny, because a sheikh from the Azhar's sheikhs wished to show zeal for religion and was excessive in what he wished, and the council wished to be patient with him and was excessive in patience. And the people's interests were lost between the sheikh's puffing up and the council's withdrawal. May God guide the people to good judgement in estimating affairs.